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AFRICA WATCHERS

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SUBJECT: MEETING WITH UNMEE DEPUTY CHIEF SECURITY OFFICER

Classified By: RSO SEAN MCCLANAHAN FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (S) SUMMARY: RSO and UK Deputy Head of Mission (DHM) met September 6 with the UNMEE Deputy Chief Security Officer (DCSO) to discuss the security situation in Eritrea. DCSO, RSO and UK DHM agreed to start a Security Officer's Working Group that would meet on a monthly/as needed basis. This first meeting was largely a personal assessment of the security environment in Eritrea by the DCSO, a Sri Lankan who has been working in his position in Eritrea for four years. DCSO claims the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) has allowed "terrorist" groups safehaven in Eritrea. He also provided his personal observations that GSE officials and Eritrean citizens are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with President Isaias and the GSE, and he noted an increase in corruption within the GSE Ministries. Worsening economic conditions in Eritrea, he noted, has also resulted in a rise of petty crime directed at UN personnel and in areas where Americans and westerners congregate. He also stated UN personnel are under constant surveillance and the GSE has intentionally trumped up incidents to publicly embarrass the UN. The DCSO said he has been tasked by the Sri Lankan government to find out if the allegations of GSE support to the Tamil Tigers are true. END SUMMARY.

12. (S) BACKGROUND NOTE: This is the first contact of RSO with the DCSO. DCSO said he has derived much of his information from a wide network of Eritrean contacts in UNMEE and others he has befriended during his four-year tenure in Eritrea. The Security Officer's Working Group plans to meet on a monthly/as needed basis to share information on crime, terrorism, and other security issues pertinent to all three groups. The Israeli security officer will be included as appropriate. END NOTE.

13. (S) The meeting opened on the issue of terrorism in Eritrea. According to the DCSO, Eritrea is a haven for "terrorists". RSO asked if he meant only the former Council of Islamic Courts (CIC) personnel residing in Eritrea or other groups like Al Qaeda or Hizbollah. DCSO stated he was unaware of any Hizbollah presence in Eritrea. However, he said his Eritrean contacts have claimed that over the last year the port city of Massawa has been used by "Al Qaeda couriers" and other "terrorist" groups. These groups allegedly transit through Eritrea, using the Massawa area as a logistical hub to conduct operations in Somalia and Yemen.

(COMMENT: While DCSO mentioned "Al Qaeda" and other "terrorist" groups, Post strongly questions what is likely very loose terminology on his part. Multiple reports over the past year indicate that a sizeable number of Somalis, some affiliated with the CIC, are resident in Massawa and Asmara and/or have transited through Eritrea. Massawa also houses a Somali refugee camp. Multiple classified and unclassified reports, including the UN monitoring group's June 27 report, indicate that arms shipment have originated or transited through Massawa and Assab ports to Somalia over this last fall/winter. Post has reported in the past on the GSE's long-time support to, and presence in Eritrea of, a variety of regional insurgent/oppositions groups from Sudan and Ethiopia. RSO did not receive a clear answer from DCSO about what firm information has led him to believe rumors that there are individuals resident in Massawa directly affiliated with Al-Qaeda -- and post has not heard corroborating reports or rumors in the past from other diplomatic missions of a possible Al-Qaeda presence, including from the Israelis. However, with the increase in Somali dissidents in Asmara, which includes the recently confirmed presence of Sheikh Aweys at the "Reconstitution Congress", and possibly others which may have links with Al-Qaeda, the situation bears watching. END COMMENT.) The DCSO said that President Isaias is allowing these groups to operate in Massawa in exchange for some sort of financial benefit. He added, though, that he did not believe the GSE would allow these groups to conduct terrorist acts in Eritrea against the UN, U.S., UK or other missions/organizations for fear of retaliation and because of its own financial interests.

¶4. (S) RSO asked if DCSO was aware of any Iranian presence in Eritrea. DCSO stated he is not aware of any official Iranian presence but Iranian businessmen visit Eritrea on a regular basis. He commented on an incident with an Israeli security team which was providing training for UN Security personnel. The Israeli team had stayed at the Intercontinental Hotel and, while in the lounge, noticed a group of men they thought were Iranians. One of the Israelis introduced himself to the group and asked where they were from. The group responded "from Iran." When the Israeli said he was from Israel to test their reactions, the conversation ended.

¶5. (S) DCSO said he has heard from his various Eritrean contacts, including friends working for the GSE, that there is widespread dissatisfaction with the Isaias regime. These Eritreans blame the Isaias regime for wrecking the economy, which has caused high rates of unemployment and hunger among the Eritrean populace. The President's actions have led to mass desertions within the Eritrean military and caused an exodus of Eritreans fleeing the regime. DCSO speculated that Isaias himself feels at risk, noting that previously Isaias traveled freely in Eritrea, but now he only travels with a security detail. He said he has heard that corruption is increasing within the GSE ministries. Since Ministers only receive a salary of about 2000-2500 nakfa (USD \$135-165) a month, some have started appropriating private residences for their personal use to augment their incomes.

¶6. (S) Regarding Isaias' health and rumors of his heavy drinking, DCSO noted that Isaias' heavy drinking is common knowledge. He added that on the first day of the Eritrean Expo in July 2007 (Eritrea's annual cultural festival), Isaias attended the opening ceremony and then stayed all day getting drunk at a bar on the Expo grounds. At one point, he reportedly became extremely belligerent and was bullying an Eritrean who was singing on a stage nearby. (COMMENT: Post is aware that Isaias is a heavy drinker. While we cannot corroborate this incident occurred at the Eritrean Expo, we would not be surprised by it. END COMMENT.)

¶7. (S) DCSO stated that Isaias is receiving aid from Libya, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. The UNMEE office is near the airport and he mentioned he has seen Libyan Government jets at the Asmara airport and that he has heard rumors that Muammar Qaddafi has made secret visits to Eritrea. He has also observed Saudi Arabian jets whose

visitors receive VIP treatment at the airport, NFI. The UK DCM added that during 2006, she also noticed several Libyan and Saudi private jets at the Asmara airport when she jogged in that area. She stated the planes had their national flags on the tails signifying they were government, not private jets. However, she had heard rumors that it was Qaddafi's son. (COMMENT: Muammar Qaddafi's son oversaw the running of Libya's Tamoil business in Eritrea until Spring 2007, but reportedly abandoned his venture due to difficulties conducting business in Eritrea. We continue to hear reports that the son occasionally travels to Eritrea and agree with UK DHM that it is more likely Qaddafi's son. Qaddafi's last known travel to Eritrea occurred in 2004. In a city as small as Asmara and with a figure as highly visible as Qaddafi, we find it improbable that he could visit Asmara without the local rumor mill picking up the scent. These planes may also have been shuttling Libyan officials affiliated with the 2007 regional initiative aimed at bringing peace to Darfur. END COMMENT.)

18. (S) RSO asked DCSO whether UN officials are being placed under surveillance by GSE personnel. DCSO stated UN personnel are under constant surveillance. He explained the GSE conducts its surveillance by monitoring western embassies, offices, residences and restaurants/hotels. As diplomats leave their houses/offices, GSE personnel radio or telephone that the diplomat has left on foot or by car, and if the latter, giving a description of their vehicle. The vehicle or person is then monitored through town by security personnel on the street or at checkpoints such as traffic circles. If the individual is meeting someone in a hotel or restaurant, GSE personnel will follow the individual into the establishment and sit near them in order to monitor their conversation. GSE personnel are routinely stationed at many places frequented in Asmara by diplomats, such as the Intercontinental Hotel and restaurants catering to foreigners. DCSO added that he has personally observed Eritreans, who he believes to be GSE surveillance, loitering outside his apartment building and talking to his guards after he has arrived at his residence. (NOTE: RSO and other Embassy personnel have reported routine incidents of similar style surveillance. END NOTE.)

19. (S) DCSO believes the GSE tries to entrap UN personnel in order to create diplomatic incidents. As one example, he related that approximately two weeks ago, a foreign staff member (who does not drink alcohol) was hit by a motorcyclist while driving a UN vehicle in town. The Eritrean police who arrived on the scene took the UN employee into custody but allowed the motorcyclist to leave, even though the latter caused the accident. The Deputy CSO was contacted and went to the police station. The Eritrean police accused the UN employee of being drunk and made him blow on the breathalyzer 10 times. Each time, the breathalyzer registered no alcohol. When the Deputy CSO asked why the motorcyclist was not also arrested since he was at fault, the police said his question was irrelevant because it is illegal for a car to be in an accident with a motorcycle in Eritrea. When the DCSO challenged this comment, the police put him in jail for five hours before releasing him. DCSO described another recent incident, also involving two foreign UN employees. The employees had traveled to a public wildlife park with two German citizens near the town of Fil Fil, located approximately 40 km NE of Asmara. After they had purchased the tickets and entered the park, the two UN employees were arrested for not having a travel permit. (NOTE: While the 25-mile prohibition on travel outside of Asmara applies to all foreigners, there are no official roadblocks on many of the roads before the 25-mile point. The DCSO admitted that the employees were at fault for traveling without a permit to a destination clearly beyond the 25-mile limit; however, he also noted that the destination was clearly one for only recreation. END NOTE.) DCSO thinks both cases were deliberate attempts by the GSE to inflate small incidents in order to embarrass the UN.

10. (S) DCSO said he has seen a dramatic increase in petty crime during his four years in Asmara. UNMEE residences are

broken into on a regular basis. RSO asked if the residences have guards. DCSO said that while some UNMEE employees choose not to have guard coverage, the UN does authorize reimbursement for male employees to employ nighttime guards and females for 24/7 guard coverage. He receives approximately 2-3 reports a month of residential break-ins and the victims range from employees with no guards to those with 24-hour coverage. DCSO indicated that the break-ins have not been forced but rather persons taking advantage of unsecured entryways. DCSO said UNMEE has also noticed an increase in crime in the downtown Asmara area, particularly with emotionally disturbed persons who harass westerners.

¶11. (S) RSO and UK DCM asked about the DCSO's opinion on the recent allegations of GSE support to the Tamil Tigers. DCSO responded that as he is former Sri Lankan military, he was asked by his government to investigate these claims. He noted that the claims have been around "for a long time" as well as a rumor that an exiled leader of the Tamil Tigers was seeking asylum in Eritrea. NOTE: RSO and UK DCM did not take notes during the meeting and were unable to get the name of this reported leader. END NOTE. He also claimed the Sri Lankan government had sent an emissary to Eritrea approximately 6 months ago to inquire about establishing an Embassy in Eritrea. The Deputy CSO explained the Sri Lankans wanted this Embassy specifically to further investigate claims of GSE support to the LTTE. However, the GSE reportedly rejected the request, stating that since there was no sizable Sri Lankan population in country, the GSE did not want them to open an embassy in Eritrea.

¶12. (S) RSO Comments: While most of the DCSO's comments track with Post's first-hand observations and/or information generally known to the Embassy and international community, Post is unable to corroborate several of his claims. We remain leery, in particular, of his characterization of the extent of "foreign terrorist" groups operating in Eritrea. While GSE restrictions severely limit our ability to assess first-hand the presence and activities of foreign groups known to reside in Eritrea, reporting from other sources does not indicate any significant presence of organized cells or groups classified by the U.S. as terrorist organizations. Post believes that the GSE has enough control over the country's borders to monitor such groups or individuals resident in Eritrea on a long-term basis -- and such groups would only be permitted to operate with the GSE's blessing and subject to its monitoring and control. The extent of the GSE's capabilities to effectively monitor its borders in terms of individuals seeking temporary safehaven or transiting the country is unknown. DCSO's comments about the Sri Lankan government seeking to open an Embassy and investigating the claims of GSE support to the Tamil Tigers are news to Post.

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